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# Memories near and far

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MEMORIES NEAR AND FAR

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by  
Merrie Marie Wright  
B.F.A., Kansas City Art Institute, 2000  
August 2004

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## Abstract

Memories Near and Far depicts the transformation, emotionally and psychologically, that occurs when childhood meets adulthood. The loss of naiveté, accumulation of experiences and memories, and the release of memory necessary to move on to new experiences mark this transition. The events that occur during this time period are represented through seven installations: *Incubation*, *I Am What I Fear*, *Consumed*, *An Offering: Gifts for Healing*, *Between Realities*, *The Self as a House: Self-Confinement*, and *Gleanings*.

The work portrays memories of my personal journey through this time, the struggles I encountered, and lessons I have learned. Color, accumulation, and repetition of materials and objects help create the psychological atmosphere of the memories depicted in each installation.

## **Memories Near and Far**

“Life without memory is no life at all...Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing...” -Luis Bunuel (Sacks, p.23)

Memories Near and Far depicts the transformation, emotionally and psychologically, that occurs when childhood meets adulthood. The loss of naiveté, accumulation of experiences and memories, and the release of memory necessary to move on to new experiences mark this transition. The events that occur during this time period are represented through seven installations: *Incubation*, *I Am What I Fear*, *Consumed*, *An Offering: Gifts for Healing*, *Between Realities*, *The Self as a House: Self-Confinement*, and *Gleanings*.

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### **Materials**

Our mind inhabits our body. The body is a shell, a container. This container works on two levels. The body contains the mechanics of our being, and it contains the mind, which houses our emotions and consciousness. For generations clay has been used to create wares for cooking and food storage, wares used for daily sustenance. Daily nourishment feeds our bodies, and our bodies feed our minds. Clay is used as the material of my figures to represent the body as a container, and speak of its need for sustenance both physically and emotionally.

Drawings are manifestations of experiences. The self is in part defined by what we have encountered. Encounters and occurrences seep into us, shaping our perceptions, our attitudes, and our emotions. The drawings on the figures depict specific experiences the figure represents. Drawings hung on the wall are glimpses into ourselves. They show the knowledge and growth we have the potential to obtain.

The sculptures create a world that is unfamiliar to the viewer. Found objects serve as a link to our reality. Objects interact with the figures, and add another layer of information to the narrative. Objects have lives. They are witnesses to things, and they

carry these memories with them. We associate experiences with objects, and the sight of these objects can trigger intense memories. “Objects hang before the eyes of the imagination, continuously re-presenting ourselves to ourselves, and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be impossible otherwise.”(Vincentelli, p. 106)

## **Figures**

My ceramic figures have two distinct realms of space, an interior and an exterior. The interior is a personal space where thoughts and feelings can be contained. The exterior is a public space. In this public space I present the public with a persona, and in return the public interprets my persona in their own way.

The figures in my thesis exhibition can be divided into two different scales, small and large. The small figures speak of childhood memories that have been frozen in time. When a distant memory returns, it has been eroded by time. What we remember are selective pieces of an experience, the things that had the greatest impact. These memories, like the small doll-like figures, are potent. The color of the figures representing childhood is acidic, like the painful, hurtful memories burned into my mind. The facial features and gestures of these figures are bold and detailed, like my memory of significant childhood occurrences.

The larger figures are closer to human scale. This size allows the viewer to easily associate themselves with the figures. The larger figures have areas about them that are less defined. While the memories of recent experiences are true to the events as they occurred, they have not reached the clarity that comes with examination. There are still aspects of the experience that are unclear, or hidden.

The interaction between the large and small figures is crucial. Without the large figures the small figures would be relegated to the realm of the doll. The interaction between the two scales speaks of a connection to each other only distanced by time.

## **Memories Near and Far**

“Why do some, perhaps most, memories fade, whereas memories of unique experiences are preserved? Why is it that memories of emotionally arousing experiences are favored?” These are questions Thomas McGaugh presents in his book *Memory and Emotion*. While McGaugh seeks answers to these questions by learning about the mechanics of the brain, I am interested in the simple answer he offers. “Memory, in a



most general sense, is the lasting consequence of an experience; but it is clearly more than that. More specifically, memory is the consequence of *learning* from an experience.”

As time goes on, we accumulate more and more memories. Memories of both good and bad experiences linger in our minds until something triggers their remembrance. Why are some memories more potent than others? Why do we remember some experiences in exquisite detail, while others, though they have not been forgotten are hazy?

Experiences that give us the most insight into our world and ourselves become very potent, while the smaller events of daily life slowly fade away with the passing of time. When we dwell on a specific experience, and replay it in our mind, we can learn more about ourselves. In my experience memories are revealed in layers. Additional layers are revealed only after careful examination and thought has been given to the previous layers. When all of the layers of a memory have been revealed, one is left with an understanding of the occurrence, even if the intricacies of the memory as it occurred in reality begin to wither.

### **Incubation**

There is a short period of time when we are carefree, unencumbered by the weight of troubles, unaffected by negativity surrounding us. When does this change? Can it be pinpointed exactly, or is it a slow creeping entity that finds us, sweeps around us, swallows us into its world?

Becoming aware of the critical and the judging marks the loss of naiveté. As a child, I was taken aback by this attack. The memories of criticism and teasing I encountered began to fester in my mind. As the fear incubated, I became watchful of my surroundings in hopes of guarding against future attacks.

The figure in *Incubation* is standing in anticipation of criticism and judging from others. A swarm of rats coming towards the figure symbolize the fears she anticipates. She believes that by watching for hurtful encounters she will be able to guard herself from an attack. As her fears incubate in her mind, they begin to fester. Her fears seep through her body, and the target she dreads becoming is emblazoned on her body.

As she watches ahead of her, the real menace (the critical and judging) is in waiting behind her. The large rat, which symbolizes her fear, is sitting in a nest of wire. The nesting material spills from the rat, and becomes a device for trapping prey. A small figurine grasping her heart has become trapped in this fear. The small figure is a miniature of the large figure, and is a premonition of things to come if this incubation of fears continues.



Image 1



Image 2

### **I Am What I Fear**

As a child, one of my greatest fears was the taunting of others. The anticipation of others seeking out my insecurities was a constant torment. My reaction to this fear was to project the torment I feared receiving back onto other unsuspecting children. I became the taunting menace I feared the most.

The central figure in *I Am What I Fear* is pointing accusingly at her taunters. She is covered in the bright red scars of hurtful occurrences inflicted on her by others. The black that envelops these scars is the negativity that she embodies.

The taunters of the central figure are also entrenched in the black negativity. Pointing hands are the relics of past taunting. Though the taunters are gone, the memory of them remains and is present all around.



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5

### **Consumed**

Accumulation of hurtful experiences can be detrimental both physically and mentally. Our body and mind can be eaten away or overcome by festering memories,

regrets, and mistakes. We are faced with the choice of being consumed by negativity, or with working through the fears and frustrations, learning from these experiences.

*Consumed* is a gathering of many figures. Each figure has been consumed by negativity, and is left incapacitated. The remains of the legs of a girl in a dress are broken and falling apart. The voids in the figure are full of nesting material. The nesting material is a remnant of experiences that were allowed to fester, resulting in disintegration of the girl. The remains of the figure and nesting material has the potential to become a home for new growth, it can be restored. Several other figures are missing limbs, hindering them, and making their existence difficult. A small, white torso with one arm is a relic of a girl consumed beyond repair.



Image 6



Image 7

### **An Offering: Gifts for Healing**

The manifestation of childhood fears and the act of confronting these fears is one of the earliest obstacles that must be overcome. Is there any compensation for working through these problems?

A grouping of young girls, presented as paper doll cut-outs, offers up gifts for healing. Soap helps cleanse wounds and wash away infection, peonies have medicinal healing powers and offer protection against future storms, milk is offered for its nourishment that makes young bodies strong, the snake embodies special healing powers and is a symbol for continuation, and the black crow offers wisdom.

The line quality of these drawings varies greatly from dark and defined to barely visible. The quality of the line emphasizes that the figures are neither here nor there. They are from a place we can not go, but if we can see them we get a glimpse into

another reality. In this other reality we are offered insight into ourselves. We see the gifts that we give ourselves when we work through experiences.



Image 8

### **Between Realities**

There is a place that is neither here nor there. It is a healing space, away from reality, where I can contemplate. This healing space is nestled among roots. These roots offer protection by becoming a shelter, and what I learn in my reflections here is nourishment for new growth.

As I lay here I can see the outside world. I watch people participating unhesitatingly in life, living in spite of uncertainty. I see experiences passing me by, and I realize that I have the desire to participate in reality. I am ready to experience life in its entirety now. I am ready to emerge from this place between realities.

*Between Realities* is a healing, quiet space. The blues and grays of the figure and the roots create an atmosphere of quiet sleep. The posture of the figure emanates comfort and calm.

The roots in this installation are made from paper. As a material, paper has a direct connection to the roots it represents (paper being made from trees). Paper also has the quality of disintegration. The bond of fine pulp pressed together will break when over-saturated with water. The shelter these roots provide is only temporary.



Image 9



Image 10

### **The Self as a House: Self-Confinement**

The house is not only where we physically reside, but where the self rests as well. Carl Jung relates the house to the psyche. Each room represents a different aspect of your self, and the different levels of a house represent the different levels of your consciousness.

Inside my house I am completely myself, unguarded in my actions. The house is my place of refuge and comfort from the outside world, but it should not be mistaken for a hiding place. If the house is used as a means of avoiding the outside world it can become a place of suffocation, depletion, entrapment.

The figure in *The House As A Self: Self-Confinement* is perched on top of her home. At the base of the house branches and string, nesting materials, wrap around and create a nest. As the nesting materials move upwards, they encroach on the figure, entwining the house and figure together. The figure has sat in this space so long that her mobility is hindered by her loss of feet. Her hands, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth have all been weakened by lack of use. The blood has been sucked out of her, leaving her drained



of color. The house has become a place of suffocation, depletion, entrapment, and the figures existence is fading away.



Image 11

### **Gleanings**

Experiences, lessons learned, and regrets accumulate as we go through life. There comes a point where these memories must be released, or they will become a burden. Carrying the burden of bad experiences can become overwhelming, so overpowering that the mind dwells only in these past experiences. Releasing these memories leaves room in your memory for new experiences. While I release the past to move on to the new, I sift through these memories for small reminders, gleanings, of lessons learned to keep with me.

The figure releasing her memories, the relics of her memories, and the gleaners, are all washed in black, brown, purple, blue, green, and yellow. These colors represent the sky during a violent storm, like a tornado, and the aftermath of battered, bruised flesh.



Image 12



Image 13



Image 14



## **Repetitions**

I am bound to repeat myself. We are engaged in an endless cycle that can only be broken after the lessons have been learned. Objects have been produced in mass to signify the repeated lessons. These objects represent my fears, the nature of my being, and the continuation of the cycle.

## **Conclusion**

Each of the installations in Memories Near and Far depict my personal memories of my psychological transformation from childhood to adulthood. Through remembering I gained insight into myself that I will carry with me into future experiences. The choice of materials, colors, and symbols to represent these experiences and memories creates an atmosphere that is a dreamlike landscape.



Image 15

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## **Vita**

Merrie Wright was born in Winfield, Illinois, on December 12, 1977. She grew up in Houston, Texas, and later moved to Olathe, Kansas, where she graduated from Olathe South High School. She earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Kansas City Art Institute in ceramics in 2000. She spent a year at Southern Methodist University as a ceramic studio resident before attending Louisiana State University.